Hipy papy bthuthdth thuthda bthuthdy

Manifesto for Concrete Poetry (1953)

BY ÖYVIND FAHLSTRÖM

"Since inviting about a hundred dogs to my home for a two-week course on lyric poetry some time ago, I have gone over to writing worlets (words, letters)."

"Remplacer la psychologie de l'homme...
par L'OBSESSION LYRIQUE
DE LA MATIERE"

(Manifesto for Futurist Literature, 1912.)

1. The present situation

...Poetry is not just for analysis, but is also created as a structural entity. And not just as a structure with the emphasis on the expression of ideas, but also as a concrete structure. Let us take our leave of the systematic or unsystematic depiction of all kinds of personal-psychological, contemporary-cultural or universal problems. Words are symbols, of

course, but that is no reason for not being able to experience and create poetry on the basis of language as concrete matter.

The fact that words have a symbolic value is no more remarkable than representational forms in the visual arts having a symbolic value over and above what they superficially represent, or non-figurative forms, even a white square on a white canvas, also having symbolic value, also providing broader associ-

Individualistá, Ladislav Novák, 1959/63.

ations, beyond our experience of the interplay of proportions.

The situation is this: ever since the War there has been a lasting, melancholy, doom-ridden mood, a feeling that all experimental extremes have been exhausted. For those who do not wish to drift into the intoxicating worlds of either heavenly or alcoholic spirits, all that remains with the means available to us is to analyze

analyze

analyze our wretched human condition.

Today when labored symbolic cryptograms, romantic effusions of beautiful words or anguished, contorted faces outside the church gate seem to be the only marketable alternatives, the alternative of concrete form must also be put forward.

Its fundamental principle is: everything that can be expressed in language and every linguistic expression has equal status in any context if it enhances the significance of that context.

The problems explored by Dostoievsky thus seem to me no more substantial or human than speculation on whether men's voices are more beautiful as hosts than as worlds. (A reference to Ö.F.'s own poem "The Large and the Small.") The subject of a play need not be a poet or a dictator in a particular temporal situation, but could equally well consist of the established fact that a particular sound can never be repeated. The results of experimental psychology can be used as the basis for a prose work just as well as those of psychoanalysis. I depict certain characters, Bob, Tom, Steve, Mary, Pat, without the least interest in them as human beings. Literature is not inhuman because of that. Ants would only write books about ants, but human beings, with their ability to be objective and take a wider perspective, do not need to be so one-sided.

2. Material and media

What is to be made of the new material? Of course it can be shaken up and reconstituted in any form whatsoever and can then be regarded from a "concrete" viewpoint as always equally viable?

That can always be said in the early stages. But the fact that the new media of expression have not yet had their evaluative criteria established, need not prevent us examining these new media, if our criteria are ever going to be clarified.

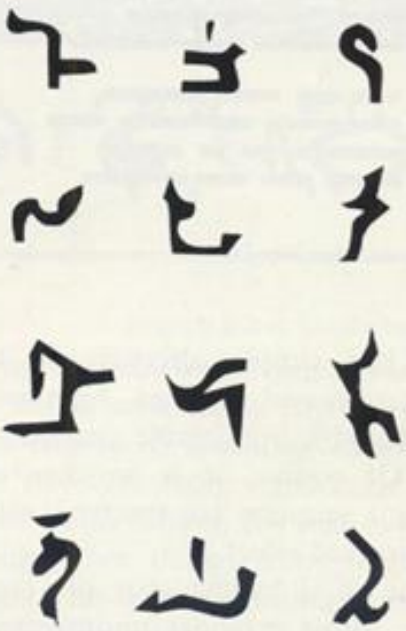
One method is to oppose as often as possible the law of least resistance. Law-lea-res. That is no guarantee of success, but it is one way of not standing still on the same spot. Utilize systems as well as automatism, prefe-

rably in combination, but only as a means to an end. So, refrain from ambitions of achieving the "purest" poetry by means of automatism; even the Surrealists no longer advocate that. And there is nothing wrong with systems: if one chooses them oneself, and does not follow conventional ones. It is thus not a question of whether the system in itself is The Only Right One. It will be right because one has chosen it and if it gives good results.

Thus, for example, I can construct a series of twelve vowels in a certain order and make my worlets out of them, even though a twelve vowel series as such does not have the same conventional justification as a series of the twelve tones of the chromatic scale.

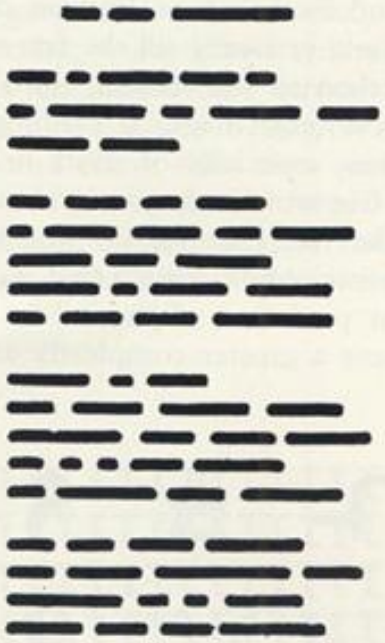
Much is said about the yearning of the modern age for a fixed code of values. One thing is certain: now that we have grown tired of rigid meter, regular rhythms, and finally even of rhyme, we must find something else to give a poem unity. Nowadays there is a tendency for the unifying element to be the content, both in terms of the subject described and the ideas represented. But it is best if form and content function as one.

What remains, therefore, is to endow form again with its own system of values. That has already been done, for example, in contrapuntal music. The possibilities are endless. In poetry there can be fractured stanzas with vertical parallelism, so that the content provides the form by the fact that when a word is repeated, it must be placed exactly under the last occurrence of the same word, or vice versa, so that when part of a line is put vertically in parallel with one above, it brings with it the meaning of the line above. Identical stanzas aided by linefilling with the rhyme on the final word in the line, or with corresponding syllables, words, etc. Marginal stanzas by the side of main stanzas. Framework stanzas having a nucleus stanza within: the possibility of several interpretations corresponding to the free movement of the eyes when looking at abstract art. That is to say, stanzas which can be read not only from left to right and from top to bottom, but also vice versa, and vertically: all the first words in each line, then all the second, third, and so on. Mirrorwriting, diagonal reading. Inversion of lines, especially of short lines. Free stress and free word-order, as in classical literature. (The fact that we do not have the same linguistic conditions for that is no argument.) The profusion of possibilities enables us to achieve a greater complexity and functional differentiation, in which each of the various parts of the content of a work acquires its own form.



Signpoem, Josef Honys.

The simplest of all systematizations of formless material is as always the alternation of antitheses, antitheses within all conceivable aspects of the work of art. The interplay of difficult and easy sentences (or paragraphs, or words), of the magniloquent and the simple, the syntactically normal and primitively cumulative, some related and some unrelated to their context, the airy and the ponderous, the halting and the smooth, the onomatopoeic and the mimetic.



Phonetic Poem, Man Ray 1924.

Not just simple alternations, but also intensification and rhythms. Anything except the comfortable predictable cadences of Lawleares. (Of course, it is another matter if amorphous sections are inserted with intentional, directed effect.)

Above all, I believe that the creation of rhythmic forms provides undreamt-of possibilities. Rhythm is not just the most elemental, directly physical and tangible medium; it is the pleasure of recognizing something already known, it is the significance of repetition; it is connected with the rhythmic pulse of breathing, blood circulation and ejaculation. It is wrong to think that the jazz band has a monopoly on inducing collective rhythmic ecstasy. Drama and poetry can also produce it. It can even be done in the visual arts, with their limited temporal dimension, as Capogrossi has demonstrated.

silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio

Silencio, Eugen Gomringer, 1954.

The solution is to break away from always churning out the new, new, new; not to leave behind a litter-bin full of designs for every step one takes in a work: to stick instead to motifs, let them repeat themselves, form rhythms: to work for example with infilling rhythmic words as a foundation for main sentences, which can be either bound by or free from the background rhythm. Independent onomatopoeic rhythmic phrases, similar to the ones constructed by an African or Indian drummer to characterize his rhythmic melodies. Simultaneous reading, and above all recitation of several lines, of which at least one consists of rhythmic words. Metrical rhythms too, of course; rhythmic wordorder, rhythmic spaces.

Another method of achieving unity and coherence is to extend the logic by creating new correspondences and new logical progressions. The simplest course is to turn to the logic of primitive peoples, of children and of the mentally ill, which abolishes contradictions, the logic of simile, of sympathetic magic.

Applying that logic to language: like-sounding words belong together; jokes even depend on them. Rhyme can function similarly. Myths have been explained in this way: when Deucalion and Ryrrha wanted to create new human beings after the Flood, they threw stones, and men and women grew from them: the word for stone was laas, and for people, laos.

Consequently if I hear of firing, I am not sure whether someone has been shot, burnt or dismissed. Figs are related to figment, pigs

to pigmentation, but not vice versa. Homonyms are also rich in possibilities. Syllepsis belongs to this category too: uniting words, sentences and paragraphs; for example, "poetry is poetry is poetry", where the middle "poetry" is both beginning and end. And for a whole work, the word "curvo" inserted at intervals, always grammatically uninflected, is just as good a cohesive agent for the structure as a single idea carried right through. Always that precious element of repetition to provide the joy of recognition.

Particularly in the more discursive art forms of epic and drama, and also film, one has to create a course of events of the same structural stability as reality itself. Give new functions to the component parts and then really exploit them, instead of using the easy improvisations that flow from inspiration; and weave a tight and distinct net of relationships. Adhere to the conventions you have constructed yourself, but not to those of others.

With such rich possibilities, ordinary interpretations and antitheses such as tragic and comic must be a facile simplification. The value of the relationship pig/pigmentation does not, therefore, consist entirely in the humorous effect which can come from the unexpected juxtaposition.

Another form of magic with the resources of language is to be found in what might be conventionally seen as the arbitrary attribution of new meanings to letters, words, sentences or paragraphs: we could say that all i's in a particular worlet denote "sickness," the more there are, the more serious the illness – or the word "sickness" in a specific paragraph denotes "all sounds," or "profits" – or that all verbs, in addition to their lexical meaning, also denote "cold".

One can take a step in that direction by putting well-known words in such a completely unfamiliar context that one undermines the reader's certainty of the sacred relationship between the word and its meaning, and

Hépérile éclaté, Camille Bryen, 1952.

makes him experience the conventional meanings as just as arbitrary or just as certain as the newly-attributed meanings. This phenomenon is nowhere more remarkable than in the case of Povel Ramel, the man who suffered among other things from stage fright, and spoke of his fever mounting in stages, so that we became aware – in this case both through the situation and the word similarity – of a new meaning in the word "stage".

That is not to say that the appearance of the well-known in a strange context arouses in everyone a productive uncertainty about the contiguity of word and phenomenon. It may perhaps stimulate an equally fruitful interest in the form itself, that is if the sentences in question are so meaningless to the reader and his interest sufficiently aroused that he continues looking for significance. Many sentences appear at first to be without significance, neither particularly funny nor poignant, neither pregnant with meaning nor vaguely sonorous.

Not least because they contain unacceptable words. Unacceptable words are those that despite the enormous expansion of poetic vocabulary during the last half century, are still not regarded as poetically viable. "Shopkeepers", "enthusiasm", "clubs", "expression", "atrocious", "whisk", "guys", "dozen", "gland". They occur, of course, but how often compared with the old guard? Reading a dictionary is just as rich in discoveries for a language-artist as browsing through a manual on insects, car engines or the body's tissues can be for a graphic artist.

Sentences can also seem empty of meaning by being constructed in a different way. This involves not just changing the word order, but shuffling the whole inbuilt clausal structure; and because thought processes are dependent on language, every attack on prevailing forms of language ultimately enriches worn-out modes of thought, thus constituting a stage in the development of language itself, and those thought processes always take place on three levels: the everyday, the literary and the academic.

Ideas for the renewal of sentence structure can come from making comparisons with foreign languages. Chinese, for example, with its lack of parts of speech, and its dependence on word order for meaning; or the unexpected nuances of expression in the languages of many primitive peoples. But it is perhaps more important, and anyway easier, to investigate the language of the mentally ill. Looking at tests on manicdepressives, for instance, one finds effects, admittedly not artistically intended, such as word combinations (contamination), pure sound-associations, word constructions (neologisms), and almost rhythmical reiteration (perseveration).

Another method is to see what can be made use of in language produced purely mechanically, by choosing new directions in which to read, or by arranging words and sentences in sequential chains. We must slowly push back the frontiers of meaning. We can find undreamt-of value in the – from our present viewpoint – most truncated and disjointed word and sentence structures.

MANIPULATE the material of language: that is what will justify a label such as concrete. Manipulate not just overall structures: rather, begin with the smallest elements, letters, words. Move letters around, as in anagrams. Repeat letters in words; intersperse alien words: gla-ten-dly; alien letters: aacataiaoana for action; explore children's secret code languages and other private languages; vowel glides: glaeiouwdly. And of course "lettristic", newly invented words. Abbreviationmania to coin neologisms, exactly as in everyday language – we already have Lawleares. It is always a matter of reshaping the material and not allowing oneself to be reshaped by it. The fundamental principle of concrete poetry can perhaps best be illustrated by Pierre Schaeffer's key experience during his search for concrete music: he had on tape a few seconds of railway engine noise, but was not content just to follow that noise with another, even if the juxtaposition was an unusual one. Instead he cut out a little fragment of the engine noise and repeated that fragment with slightly altered pitch; then went back to the first, then the second, and so on, to give an alternation. Only then had he created; he had performed an operation on the material itself by cutting it up: the elements were not new; but the new whole which had been formed had created new matter.

It will be clear from this that what I have called concrete literature is not a style, any more than concrete music or non-figurative visual art is. It is partly a way for the reader to experience literary art, primarily poetry, and partly a liberation for the poet, putting at his disposal all linguistic material and all the means to work on it. Literature which is created on that basis is therefore neither in opposition to nor identical with Lettrism or Dada and Surrealism.

Lettrism: both normal "descriptive" and "lettristic" words can be understood as both form and content: the "descriptive" provides a stronger experience of content and a weaker experience of form, "lettristic" vice versa – a difference only of degree.

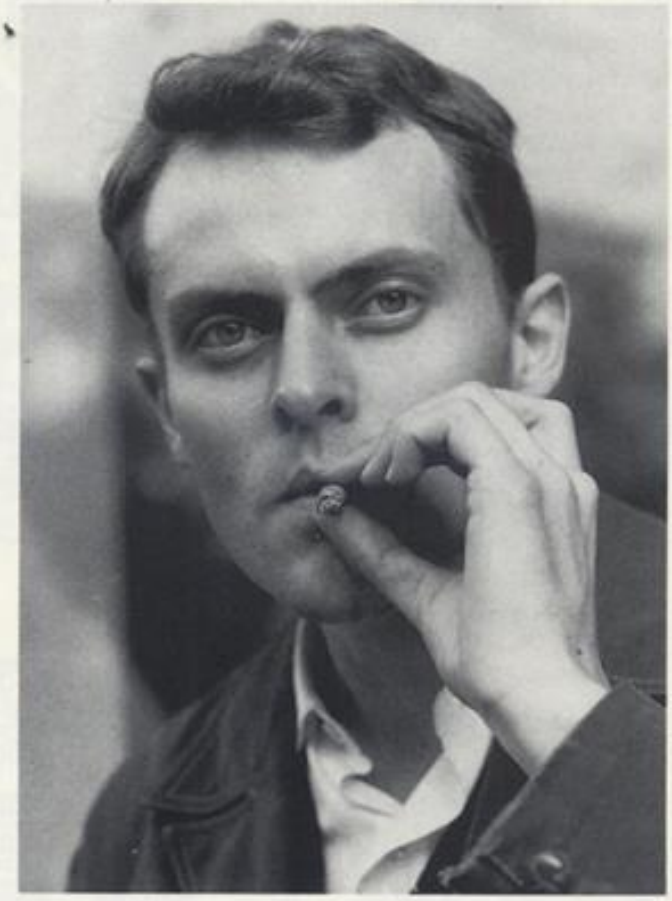
If one looks at the actual creations of Surrealist poetry, they appear to have certain similarities with worlets. But there is a difference in the point of departure which ultimately must have an effect on the results: the concrete reality of my worlets is not at all in opposition to the reality of their surroundings: they are neither dream-sublimation nor futuristic fantasy, but an organic part of the reality I am living in, although with their own principles for life and development.

A coquettish or anguished contortion, and even more the nihilism of Dada, can be productive if one looks at the artistic result; here again it is the point of departure that counts: I can find no reason to talk of contortion and nihilistic negation, I have no feeling of an artistic construct, of an unusual state of affairs – this is normality. A constructive Dadaism and thus not Dada at all.

When I have used the word "concrete" in these contexts, it has a stronger association with concrete music than with visual concretism in a narrow sense. Also, of course, the concrete poet is in the tradition of formalists and language manipulators of all ages: the Greeks, Rabelais, Gertrude Stein, Schwitters, Artaud, and many others. And he looks up in veneration not only to Owl in Winnie the Pooh but also to Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, who regards every question as a riddle and imbues words with unfathomable meanings.

(1953)

ÖYVIND FAHLSTRÖM (1928 – 1976). Born in São Paulo, poet, painter, filmmaker, radioartist, critic etc. Published Manifesto for Concrete Poetry in 1953, took up painting at the same time. Settled in New York in the early 60's, with frequent visits to Sweden, during the summers, he became an important mediator between the New York avant-garde and Swedish contemporary artists. He produced provocative happenings, wrote theatre plays, undertook various film projects and developed his variable paintings, game-paintings and the World Map project. Much of Fahlström's pictorial work shows the influence of his early interest in concrete poetry. The radio play "Fåglar i Sverige" (Birds of Sweden) was broadcast 1963. "Den Helige Torsten Nilsson" (Holy Torsten Nilsson), a five hour sound novel, or "blind movie", was broadcast in 1966.



Öyvind Fahlström, 1960. Photo Lütfi Özkök.

OPERA began with my discovery of the felt-tip pen in 1952. With this, I could work not only with a fairly precise, even blacknesslike India ink, but also with gradations of gray which were not fuzzy like pencil drawings; the felt tip also produced random textures. The pleasurable "spontanism" in that method of working felt monotonous after a while. I began to put together some of the sheets on which I had drawn, and could see continuity and larger schemes beginning to appear.

I also saw that various different ideas, joined together as an entity, produced shifts: unexpected, "unnatural" events on the paper. I was interested at that time in Pre-Columbian Mexican book-paintings, which evolved from page to page in long panels, folded in concertina fashion. And in music – as a graphic artist, I lacked the temporal dimension that exists in music. I particularly liked the "impure" mixture of concert and theater to be found in opera ("The Ring of the Nibelungs", for example!)

I realized how, as in much primitive, oriental and medieval art, one could work with pictures which were so full and so extensive that it was not possible to take that step backwards, screw up one's eyes and enjoy the whole... I wanted to get people to move not just their eyes but their whole person, along and around in the picture as if they were reading a map, or playing Monopoly or football.

The idea of a game was my current interest at the time I was writing the "Manifesto for Concrete Literature". There too I expressed impatience with the monotony and private nature of pure automatism. One ought to be able to make simple rules for oneself, create frames of reference within the work of art. The simplest fundamental rule in Opera was: repetition. It felt then like a big discovery: not (merely) a continuous sequence of constantly changing motifs, but a decision – this one is important, this shall have a rule. Recurring in new contexts, and recurring altered, but recognizable.

ÖYVIND FAHLSTRÖM